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Transportation Meets Social Welfare

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TRANSPORTATION MEETS SOCIAL WELFARE

OTREC researchers examine the human relations impact of transportation and land management decisions involving homeless encampments.

The Issue

OTREC researchers helped state transportation department staff members face a problem that isn't strictly part of their job description: how best to deal with homeless individuals and households living in DOT rights of way and rest areas. As owners of some of the largest stretches of public land, DOTs have to maintain the land for public use, but may lack resources to address the social welfare aspects of the stewardship of public land.

Homeless individuals and families sometimes seek shelter in rest areas, drawn to the facilities available there. When an established homeless encampment begins to interfere with the rest area's intended function or threaten the safety of its users, a state DOT may need to intervene. In 2010, the Baldock Restoration Group relocated 37 homeless households from the Baldock Rest Area near Wilsonville, Ore. Due to its scale, the Baldock Rest Area relocation provided OTREC researchers with a unique opportunity to analyze the process and consider how best to respond to issues of this nature in the future.

The Research

Investigators Ellen Bassett and Andrée Tremoulet of Portland State University set out to determine the extent to which homeless encampments across the country pose an operational and/or safety concern for DOTs, to research best practices related to homeless encampments by DOT staff in other states, and to prepare a case study of the Baldock Rest Area relocation.

The most important lesson from the Baldock case study is that the project was successful largely due to collaboration, with no single agency handling the entire process. The Baldock Restoration Group was multidisciplinary, and its core membership included the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), The Canby Center (a faith-based social service organization), Clackamas County Social Services, Clackamas County District Attorney's Office, Oregon State Police, Oregon Travel Information Council, and Oregon

THE ISSUE

As owners of some of the largest stretches of public land, DOTs may need to involve themselves with the relocation of homeless encampments. This is a wide-scale problem which requires a multidisciplinary approach.

THE RESEARCH

Researchers created a best practices guide, to help ODOT approach this issue, by closely studying the 2010 Baldock Rest Area Relocation effort. The Baldock Relocation:

- Involved 37 homeless households;
- Was effected by a collaboration among several community organizations;
- Offered researchers a unique opportunity, because of its size and scale, to study the process and its effects.

THE IMPLICATIONS

In addition to the Best Practices Guide, this research provides a detailed case study of one of the largest relocation efforts in Oregon. This information stands to give DOTs an informed and prepared way to approach similar situations in the future.

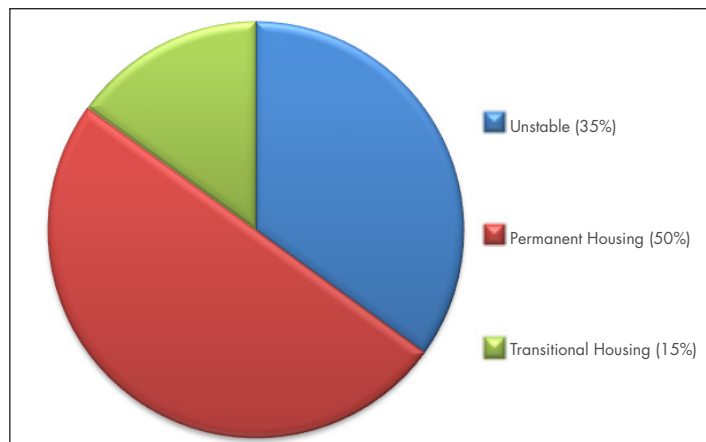
*Photo: Christina Elston,
Photographer. The Detailed Life.*

Housing and Community Services. The Baldock Restoration Group's approach was to use a "push-pull" method, combining the "push" force of law enforcement with the "pull" of opportunities for assistance.

The Law Enforcement Strategy Subcommittee worked with ODOT to develop new, more easily enforced rest area rules and a firm deadline for the area to be vacated. The Restoration Group members assisted the Baldockeans, as the campers had come to call themselves, in complying with the rules and deadline. The Canby Center and Clackamas County Social Services provided intensive, one-on-one assistance to help each willing Baldockean begin to unravel and address some of the underlying issues that had led to homelessness. They tapped a small pot of one-time-only "flexible funds" provided by the state housing agency to help cover immediate expenses such as gas, the services of mechanics, identification cards, food, camping fees, and other incidental necessities to help the Baldockeans move on.

Implications

The Baldock Case Study offers a successful model for how to approach these complex situations. Two-thirds of the formerly homeless residents were in permanent or transitional housing 16 months after the completion of the project, and nearly half of those who were in unstable living situations had experienced a period of stability before relapsing. Crime in the area was reduced by 70 percent. The homeless encampment was gone, and the Baldock Rest Area now functions primarily as a place for travelers and truck drivers to refresh themselves, sample Oregon's natural environment, obtain information about attractions and accommodations in the area and, if needed, sleep for a few hours. Along with these visitor functions, the rest area continues to serve a smaller number of transitionally homeless individuals who sleep there in conformance with new rules. But it is no longer home to a round-the-clock resident population.



Long-term housing outcomes of the Baldock Relocation

Sixteen months after the move, two-thirds of the formerly homeless residents were in permanent or transitional housing, and nearly half of those who were in unstable living conditions had experienced a period of stability before relapsing.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Relocation of Homeless People from ODOT Rights-of-Way

INVESTIGATORS: Ellen Bassett, Ph.D., formerly of Portland State University; Andrée Tremoulet, Ph.D., Portland State University

PROJECT NUMBER: 2012-477

PARTNERS: Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), PSU School of Urban Studies & Planning, PSU Office of Research and Sponsored Projects

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MORE INFORMATION <http://otrec.us/project/477>

ations in the area and, if needed, sleep for a few hours. Along with these visitor functions, the rest area continues to serve a smaller number of transitionally homeless individuals who sleep there in conformance with new rules. But it is no longer home to a round-the-clock resident population.

In addition to the Baldock Case Study, Bassett and Tremoulet compiled a Best Practices Guide for ODOT to use when confronted with similar situations in the future.